

**Level: Master 1**

**Specialty: Language and Communication**

**Module: E- Learning**

**Course 3: Virtual Learning Environments**

- **Course Scope:** An introduction to the general topic of e- learning "how people learn at distance" (this course is an exploration of the major benefits and drawbacks of the VLEs)

- **Course Objectives**

At the conclusion of this course, you should be able to:

- Construct a broad idea of the VLEs
- Conceive a clear vision of the appropriate application and exploitation of the VLEs

- **Course Content**

**Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)**

New universities (post 1992) are increasingly opening up to the possibilities of 'Virtual Learning Environments', sometimes employed under the term of MLEs (Managed Learning Environments). They lay on the bases of placing an entire course/syllabus on a virtual platform so that no personal interaction between lecturer and student is required. Communication is via email and assessments are submitted electronically.

Most VLEs are currently supported by purpose built software such as **Blackboard** ([www.blackboard.com](http://www.blackboard.com)) and **WebCT (Course Tools)** ([www.webct.com](http://www.webct.com)). Microsoft also enables VLEs to be set up through MS Exchange.

**Benefits**

- Widens access to the course: students can learn from wherever they are and numbers do not have to be limited.
- Can be more cost effective.
- Provides access to more information, and allows students to use their own initiative to find it.
- Simply a 'different' way of learning, which some students enjoy.
- Students imbibe extra computer skills that may prove useful generally.
- Students can study whenever and wherever they want to.

### Drawbacks

- Students miss out on the benefits of face-to-face interaction and the knowledge sharing that can arise from this.
- Students find that the system is not sufficiently supported, and have difficulty using it.
- Computer systems can be prone to technical difficulties. Failure of server can mean the students are unable to study.
- Less technology-savvy students may not perform as well as they would do in a traditional class.
- There are potential health risks associated with excessive computer usage.

***(Adapted from Gizella Dewath (2004). An Introduction to e-Learning: A Study of the Current State of e-Learning in the United Kingdom)***

### ⊙ Content of VLEs

A key use of VLEs is for communication. VLEs can contain a personal mail-box for each student, as well as any number of bulletin boards, discussion groups and real-time chat rooms. These communication systems are designed for both Student-Lecturer and Student-Student interaction. Students are able to discuss issues and express their own idea as well as circulate their own resources and information. Students are also able to interact with other students doing the same course in other institutions and even in other countries.

### ⊙ VLEs vs. Virtual classroom

A virtual classroom is an e- learning situation implies that an instructor teaching remotely and in real time to a group of learners. In such a setting, the instructor is employing a combination of materials (e.g. PowerPoint slides, audio or video materials). It is also called synchronous learning.

This method helps the instructor to present a variety of materials and requires the least amount of effort to convert them into e-materials. Appropriate technology must be in place for both the learners and providers (e.g. software for the virtual classroom and good internet connectivity).

### Discussion

Here are some questions to answer as an extension of the course content (To be discussed in groups):

- 1) How does e-Learning exploit interactive technologies and communication systems to improve the learning experience?

- 2) Does the VLE have the potential to transform the way we teach and learn across the board?
- 3) *Can VLEs replace teachers and lecturers?*

#### Supplemental Resources

- 1) Online Learning and Teaching With Technology Murphy, Walker, Webb, 2001
- 2) An Introduction to e-Learning A Study of the Current State of e-Learning in the United Kingdom Gizella Dewath: 2004
- 3) 3) Macromedia Managed Learning Environment Activity in Further and Higher Education in the UK  
[http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded\\_documents/mle-study-final-report.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/mle-study-final-report.pdf)
- 4) 4) DfES Using the Web for Interactive Teaching and Learning (zip) Pat Brogan (Macromedia) July 2003  
[http://download.macromedia.com/pub/authorware/whitepapers/whitepaper\\_interactive.zip](http://download.macromedia.com/pub/authorware/whitepapers/whitepaper_interactive.zip)
- 5) 5) Virtual Learning Environment Activity in Further Education in the UK (DOC) 1999 [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded\\_documents/VLE-in-FE.doc](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/VLE-in-FE.doc)